

Martin Levy:
*Ban the bomb! Michael Randle and Direct
 Action against Nuclear War*
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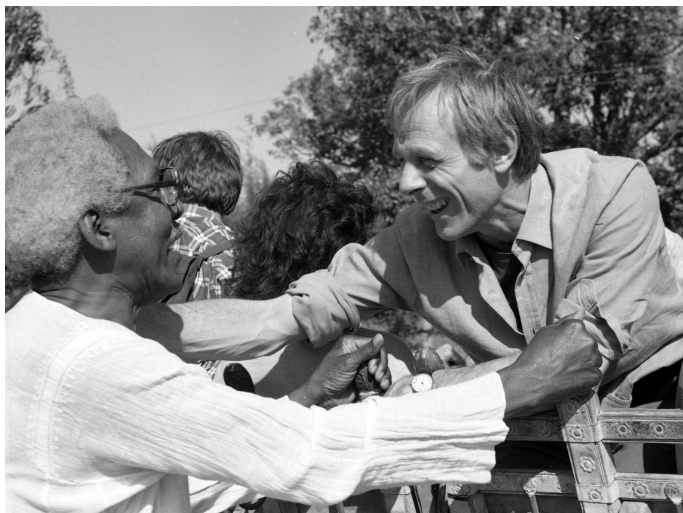
I have been a friend, colleague and comrade of Michael Randle for forty years—so I cannot claim that what follows is a dispassionate book review.

As someone who was active in a local peace group during the ‘first wave’ of the nuclear disarmament movement in the UK in the late 1950s/early 1960s, Michael Randle was something of a national figure within peace movement circles. He had been at the heart of a small group of activists centred very much around the pacifist publication *Peace News*, who explored modes of civil disobedience and other forms of nonviolent direct action as part of what Michael saw as a transition from *conscientious objection* to *conscientious resistance* to the threat of nuclear war.

He became involved as early as 1952, after reading in *Peace News* about a sit-down outside the War Office in London by seven women and seven men who were members of an initiative called *Operation Gandhi*. During the early 1950s, Operation Gandhi, under its new name of *Nonviolent Resistance Group*, organised various small-scale demonstrations and nonviolent protests outside military bases and weapon-research establishments. As Michael was later to recall, the public impact of these small-scale actions was minimal: ‘Its importance lay in the pioneering demonstrations it undertook, the national and international network of nonviolent activists it established, and the internal political debate it stimulated on the use of direct action in a parliamentary democracy’ (Randle, 1986).

One of the most significant of international contacts made during this period was Bayard Rustin, who later coordinated the 1963 civil rights March on Washington. Bayard was one of the speakers in Trafalgar Square when several thousand people gathered to mark the start of the 1958 Easter March to the atomic weapons research establishment at Aldermaston. The march was organised by the Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War (DAC) into which the Nonviolent Resistance Group had morphed. It was on this march that the famous peace symbol designed by Gerald Holtom was

first displayed. According to Michael it was Bayard who was instrumental in introducing the symbol to the United States, whilst he was also given to understand by Bayard that it was the size and the success of that first Easter March that planted the seed that was to germinate into the 1963 March on Washington. In 1959 Michael reunited with Bayard in Ghana as members of an international group formed to protest the French atomic tests in the Algerian Sahara.



Michael Randle & Bayard Rustin, War Resisters International Triennial, Vedchi, Gujarat, 1985.

In 1960, Michael returned to the UK from Ghana and in October took up the role of secretary to the newly launched Committee of 100, created with the aim of mobilising large numbers of people to participate in large-scale modes of nonviolent direct action, particularly mass civil disobedience in the form of sit-down demonstrations. Encouraged by the turn-outs for the sit-downs in London, the Committee decided to take the struggle to the bases where the nuclear weapons were to be deployed, intending to sit down on the runways to halt flights. The state authorities tried to weaken the resolve of the protestors by threatening to charge the organisers with the serious offence of ‘conspiracy and incitement to breach the Official Secrets Act’. Undeterred the action went ahead at Wethersfield US airbase.¹ Michael

¹ There is a really interesting film of the protest drawing on footage from

was one of the 'Wethersfield Six', and at the trial that followed in February 1962. Christopher Driver was a journalist who attended the trial, and made an observation which conveys something of the quality of the accused:

The most thorough explanation of the defendants' actions and opinions took place during the examination of Michael Randle [...] A thoughtful, if anything over-serious man, a pacifist since long before the Committee had been thought of, Randle had in common with the other defendants a preoccupation amounting almost to an obsession with nuclear weapons, together with great reserves of moral staying power. He was the most articulate of the prisoners [...stating]: 'If nuclear weapons were ever used by this country and there was a retaliatory attack, most, if not all, of the people in this country would be destroyed, and therefore I cannot hold that these bases are essential to the defence of this country, or for the defence of any country'.

Despite such a strong defence, Michael was sentenced to 18 months in prison.

Michael told me some interesting stories about how he gained status among the inmates of the prison in London where he served his sentence. Once again Bayard Martin made an appearance in Michael's life. Bayard had been in Addis Ababa for a Pan-African Freedom Conference, and travelled back to the US via London.² The story goes that he strode into the Peace News office saying he had come to see Michael Randle, only to be told he was in 'the clink'. Bayard thereupon phoned the prison, using the poshest of English accents, requesting permission to see his friend Michael and dropping the names of a range of internationally-known figures. The governor of Wormwood Scrubs at that time was quite liberal, and so permission was granted, and Bayard, adorned with an eye-catching fur hat, got to meet his friend Michael. Apparently after the visit other prisoners came up to Michael to make enquiries about the visit he had had from some Ethiopian prince!³

Anglia Television News. The film includes an interview with Michael, as confident and articulate as ever! Accessible at <https://eafa.org.uk/work/?id=894650> (5 October 2021)

² C. Stolte, *Gandhian on the road*. Accessible at <https://tinyurl.com/t5c9aa22> (6 October 2021)

³ Whilst in Lewes Prison serving another sentence Michael enhanced his

It was also while he was serving his sentence in Wormwood Scrubs during 1962-3 that Michael befriended the British secret agent George Blake who had been sentenced to 42 years for passing secret information to the USSR. A few years later, in October 1966, Michael, his wife Anne, and his friend and fellow-inmate Pat Pottle joined Sean Bourke in engineering Blake's escape from prison, eventually spiriting him away to East Germany concealed in a camper-van driven by Michael, accompanied by Anne and their two young boys Sean and Gavin.

Less than six months after the excursion to East Germany, Michael was at it again—this time participating in a nonviolent occupation of the Greek Embassy in London in protest against the military coup in Greece of 21 April 1967. In October 1967, he was sentenced to 12 months in prison. After his release, whilst chairperson of War Resisters International, he helped organise protests in a number of Warsaw Pact countries against the 1968 Soviet suppression of the *Prague Spring* political liberalisation movement in Czechoslovakia. This involvement led to his collaboration with the London-based Czech dissident Jan Kavan, with whom Michael, his long-term colleague April Carter, and others, ran a courier service smuggling literature and printing equipment to the democratic opposition in Czechoslovakia during the 1970s.⁴

I could go on, but I am exhausted just thinking about such a life. Suffice to say that from the 1980s onwards, Michael spent more of his time as a peace researcher and academic than as an activist and jail-bird—authoring a series of significant books and coordinating research projects.⁵

standing with the ferocity of his tackling in a rugby game organised between two teams from the prison.

⁴ Jan Kavan was to become the Czech Minister of Foreign Affairs, 1998-2002.

⁵ Michael was the coordinator of the Alternative Defence Commission and contributed to its final report *Defence without the bomb* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1983). This was followed by his coordination of the Social Defence Project, which resulted in his book *People Power: The building of a new European home* (Stroud: Hawthorne Press, 1991). This was followed by *Civil resistance* (London: Fontana, 1994), which informed his coordination of the Bradford-based Nonviolent Action Research Project, which resulted in the publication of *Challenge to nonviolence* (Bradford: Department of Peace Studies, 2002).

In his late-80s he is still actively involved with his local rowing club, and he still has the capacity (which has always amused me) of arousing himself into righteous indignation at the drop of a hat at any instance of injustice—whether it be a matter of world affairs or the latest instance of inconsiderate drivers endangering the lives of cyclists. Maybe that is one of the keys to his character, alongside his amazing will-power and determination.

But I want to return to Christopher Driver's observations about Michael being, perhaps, over-serious. Of course, like many of us, Michael has taken seriously such issues as the threat of nuclear annihilation and the like. But he also has the capacity to laugh, and to laugh at himself. He is such a rich character—something of a poet with the capacity to recite other poets at the drop of a hat. He is also a lover and player of music, a keen gardener and an enthusiastic follower of rugby (union and league).⁶

Given all this, it is no surprise that for years friends have been hoping that Michael would devote some of his time to writing his autobiography—but there always seemed to be more pressing matters upon which to focus. But now Martin Levy, a librarian at the University of Bradford, has delved into Michael's archives held there, and put together a book based on his conversations and interviews with Michael. I confess that I was really excited when I got my first glimpse of the book, dipping into it, wondering if Michael covered all the stories I have heard from him over the years. As I read the words on the page I could see and hear Michael, getting himself animated as he talked, then laughing in that self-deprecating manner that has helped him retain his humanity. He came alive off the page for me.

For example, I know from time spent with Michael that he had tremendous regard for the Reverend Michael Scott, perhaps best known as a champion of the Namibia freedom struggle. In December 1958 he joined a protest organised by the DAC at the site of a missile base being constructed at North Pickenham in Norfolk. Here is Michael's account from the book:

The police were there. The first time you sat down they dragged you away. Then if you went back, they arrested you. You just went limp, as had been agreed at one of the earlier briefings.

⁶ For many years we would go camping with Michael and Anne, and spend the evening drinking and reading poems to each other - that is, I would read, Michael would recite!

Those of us who were arrested – I think there were about thirty or forty of us out of about a hundred or so – were taken to a police station where we spent the night.

[...] we were taken before the magistrate [...] we were given the opportunity of pledging to be of good behaviour and to keep the peace. We refused that, so we were taken to Norwich Prison. That was my first experience of prison. I shared a cell in Norwich with Michael Scott, who as I've said was a big figure, really something of a hero. It was an honour to be sharing a cell with him. (pp. 87-8)

Michael Scott was to become a leading figure in the Committee of 100, alongside Bertrand Russell. In the late summer of 1961, Michael (Randle) was actually invited to spend a weekend at the Russell's home in North Wales. Here is Michael's account of that experience:

It was an amazing experience. His wife, Edith, was there as well and I think they were both put out by the fact that I was a vegetarian. On one occasion, I was talking to Russell about prime ministers, and I remember him saying that he had known Gladstone. He actually knew the man! And then I said to him, rather naively, 'Who was the first prime minister you met?' And he said, 'The first prime minister I ever met was my grandfather, Lord John Russell.' Jesus! (laughs). I should have done a bit more research! (p. 105)

Finally a story from Michael's wife Anne about their first date:

We went to the Odeon, Leicester Square, to see a film and the Pathé News came on, which was part of the programme in those days, and it was about a German Panzer regiment training in Wales. Michael shouted, 'Shame!' I was so shocked. I'd never been with anyone who would do that sort of thing. I was wriggling in my seat, thinking I've got a whole evening of this. And then they played the bloody national anthem. Everybody stood up. They used to play it before the main film, because if they played it at the end of the programme everybody rushed out. So, I stood up. But who didn't stand up? The man next to me. I just thought, who is this person? (pp. 126-7)

I could go on—but I trust this is sufficient to provide a ‘taste’ of the book and the nature of its subject. Martin Levy has been really diligent and conscientious in his research into the archives, which has enabled him to engage with Michael (and Anne) and elicit significant detail about his life, his principles, and his encounters. Absolutely fascinating, providing a deep insight in to the commitment, the courage, and the ‘bloody-mindedness’ that have somehow gelled together in Michael (and to be honest—in quite a few other trouble-making peace-niks and activists). I think Martin could have improved the text by a more liberal use of explanatory footnotes and more substantial scene-setting overviews as introductions to each chapter, but that said there can be little doubt this the book is a very important resource for researchers of the nonviolent direct action wing of the British peace movement in the 20th century. But it is more than a research resource, it is also a treasure, given that it is probably the nearest we are going to get to an actual autobiography, and as such it deserves to be read and enjoyed.

References

- Driver, C. *The disarmers: A study in protest*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1964, p. 166.
- Randle, M. “From conscientious objection to nonviolent resistance”, in G. Chester & A. Rigby, eds., *Articles of Peace: Celebrating fifty years of Peace News*, Bridport: Prism Press, 1986, pp. 27-35, p. 30.